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Effective Communication and Smooth Administration of Academic Libraries in the 21st Century: a New Paradigm in Nigeria

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Introduction

The academic library has been from its inception an integral part of institutions of higher learning, rather than an appendix or adjunct (Aguolu, 1989). The academic library, like any other formal establishment, is designed and run people whose job is to combine and use organizational resources to achieve organizational objectives. The term administration is used to identify this group of people.

Over the past 25 years, academic libraries have been affected by changes in information technology. The rate of change is still accelerating in this area. The introduction of various Information Technology (IT) trends has led to reorganizations, changes in work patterns, demand for new skills, job retraining, and reclassification of positions. Etim's (2004) view is illuminating:

The technological development of the past 25 years, such as the electronic database, online services, CD-ROMs, and the introduction of Internet has radically transformed access to information.

Similarly, Afolabi (2004) averred that:

In recent years, certain social administrative and psychological forces make it mandatory for information professions in general and librarian in particular to acquire skills in technology, marketing and entrepreneurship or become irrelevant in the 21st century science and technologically driven information society.

In this period of constant change, library managers should know that they are in the business of communicating. They are responsible for management of ideas, beliefs, and information. Traditionally there are two components within the administrative structure of the academic library. The first is the collated information, i.e., in written, printed and electronic format. The other component is the intellectual tool set: the skills such as cataloguing, indexing, and reference work.

This paper seeks to discuss the role of new and emerging Information and Communication Technology (ICTS) in achieving change, and discusses the idea of academic libraries as the constantly revised invention of people working together.

Communication

Recent developments in the field of information and communication technologies, as a result of the convergence of computing and telecommunication technologies, has had significant impact on library and information center management. Different technologies creates different time horizons, values, job design, and skills has prompted the creation of structures and managements styles that fit the technology and its culture. The library administrator must be aware of these management techniques, communication technologies and principles, and be adept at using the right one at the right time. The extent to which the formal and informal channels of communication are used within libraries will depend upon the types, size, complexity, corporate culture, organization of library, and how well they integrate the information and communication technology (ICT) into the general functions and activities of the library (Ajayi, 2001). Upward communication provides instant feedback on how well employees understand downward communication in accordance with supporting management decisions.

Madu (2000) asserts that the need for paper might vanish as downward communication may take a number of ways in the performance of the basic operating functions of the library. Senior executives require skills and knowledge that will enable them cope with changes in the communication and information services industry today (Shibanda, 2001). Horizontal communication is between colleagues in the library or in other libraries. Systems like telex, facsimile, or e-mail enhances this kind of communication. Both libraries and their parent organizations should provide a kind of “electronic desk.” The paperless office can ensure that information is timely, accurately, precise, and relevant.

Library Administration and Effective Communication

The academic library is not an end in itself (Bryson, 1990). Librarianship is not managing collections; rather, there is a growing realization that other resources: human, technical, financial, and technological must to be managed effectively. Etim (2004) observed that:

The rapid pace of development in the field of information technology and the advent of networked information services have prompted a comprehensive review of library and information sciences (LIS) profession.

The information manager must have the leadership, communication, presentation, and interpersonal skills to steer academic libraries through guidance, advice and mentoring (Shibanda 2001).

Ajayi (2001) describes a library transformed into a new information service unit, providing electronic cataloging, electronic on-line public access catalogue (OPAC), electronic acquisition and serials control, electronic inter-library loan and electronic circulation functions. Modern ICT facilities can also provide content and information dissemination by means such as electronic theses and dissertations. Students can benefit from millions of pages of relevant

information on the web if the universities can provide adequate ICT facilities to these academic libraries. Shibanda (2001) cautions that the existing fear and resistance regarding the right to communicate, have access to information, and exchange experiences and ideas via Internet connectivity should not be tolerated.

The role of strategic and long-range planning is important as the roles of libraries and librarians are being redefined. The library's instructional mission must be viewed as essential to the survival of the library and its supporting functions, especially in terms of planning for new technologies that will be used in and out of the library itself (Madu et al 2000).

Issues to Consider

The core skills traditionally associated with information professionals, which include information handling skills, training and facilitating skills, evaluation skills and concern for the customer, are all still relevant. For example, cataloguing and classification can be used to improve the end users experience of networked information retrieval. The creation of meaningful metadata files based on cataloguing principles can help users find needles in the information haystack. It should be noted for the record that the role of the librarian as both user educator and intermediary is prevalent in this environment (Sharp, 2000). Shibanda contends that the real challenge for academic libraries in Africa is to hire administrators who have the skills and competencies to develop meaningful programs which support the use of information and communication technology.

Sharp (2000) states further:

These network advances have transformed modes of communication and will result in significant changes in traditional library structure to accommodate organized information and access to it; from your desktop it is now possible to link easily and cost effectively into service, systems and information which were previously either not accessible or not even known.

She sums up the characteristics of the environment in which librarians are now working: greater access to a range of information; increased speed in acquiring information; greater complexity in locating, analyzing and limiting information; constantly changing technology; lack of standardization of both hardware and software; continuous learning for users and library staff; and substantial financial investment for technology.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Library and information centre managers have the responsibility to provide effective and efficient but relevant information to their user. They must incorporate information and communication technology into both practice and training, if they are to become relevant in this new information age. The new paradigm for the library manager is that of champion of change in their organization. To further stress this, the national president of the Nigerian library Association (NLA) Daniel (2004), emphasizes the need, "to have a plan with mission and a vision which will equip the association meet the challenges of the 21st century globalization of our profession."

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